Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 25: Disabled Actors

Guests: Shannon DeVido and Ryan Haddad

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE: Hey hey! Welcome the Disability Visibility Podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. I have a confession to make: I was a high school drama nerd. My joy for performing collided head-on with ableism when my teacher told me I couldn't advance to the second year of drama because she said I couldn't fulfill the pantomime component. I asked if I could adapt it and pantomime from my wheelchair, and she said no. What's worse, my guidance counselor backed her up. Long story short, this was a turning point in my life.

I thought about about these formative experiences many years ago when I interviewed my two guests for today's episode, actors Shannon DeVido and Ryan Haddad. Shannon and Ryan are both disabled actors working in New York City. Both are triple threats: Actors, writers, and performers. You'll hear them talk about why they love acting and how they broke into the entertainment industry. We also discuss disability representation in media and why actually disabled actors should play disabled characters or at least have the opportunity to play disabled characters.

Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we go!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

Introduction to the guests

[light, jaunty music]

ALICE: Shannon and Ryan, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

SHANNON DEVIDO: Thank you for having me!

RYAN HADDAD: Oh, my gosh, I'm thrilled.

ALICE: I was wondering if both of you would like to just introduce yourself.

RYAN: My name is Ryan Haddad. I'm an actor, playwright and autobiographical solo performer. I'm originally from a suburb of Cleveland called Parmer, Ohio. And I went to college at Ohio Wesleyan University. As soon as I graduated, I knew that I needed to be in New York. And I knew that I needed to be a star. And so, I am here, trying on a daily basis to be famous.

I should say that I have cerebral palsy, and I walk with a walker.

ALICE: How about you, Shannon?

SHANNON: My name is Shannon DeVido. I am from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I went to school right outside Nashville, Middle Tennessee State University, which is in a town called Murfreesboro. So, you know, big dreams.

RYAN: [laughs]

SHANNON: I was a music business major because my parents wouldn't let me go to school to be a singer. So, I was like, ha ha ha! I went to school for music business, then! Equally unnecessary degree. And then I decided to become an actor.

[light, jaunty music]

Getting into acting

ALICE: When was the first time you realized like, OMG, this is my calling?

RYAN: I was on my living room floor. I started walking with the walker at age three with great resistance. I did not understand why anybody would walk when crawling was such a viable option.

SHANNON: [chuckles]

RYAN: I would crawl around on my knees on the living room floor, and I would put on little plays by myself or princess movies from the Disney canon.

SHANNON: [laughs]

RYAN: And it's sort of come full circle because now I'm a solo performer, and I do a lot of autobiographical storytelling and work where I'm just me onstage, alone. But starting at age five, we formed something—or I formed something, and they were sort of all dragged along in the process—called the Haddad Theater. Literally for eight years, we put on plays riffing off of my favorite movies and musicals, starting in the living room, moving to the backyard, and ultimately ending up on the stage of our community center. And I sort of knew in my little, tiny body that I was gonna end up on the TV screen, and I was gonna end up on a Broadway stage before I knew what Broadway was or had any concept of how difficult a career as a professional actor was for disabled people.

There were moments in adolescence and stuff where I doubted this career path for me. But you don't have to settle for what society says is the correct path as a disabled person.

ALICE: Shannon, why don't you tell me about how you got started with acting?

SHANNON: My story, I guess, is a little bit different than Ryan’s. Although that was the most magical story I've ever heard.

So, I started acting when I was very young also. Our elementary school, everybody had to be in the plays. I was like, oh no. This is super fun. I get to be somebody else. This is so great. And so, all throughout elementary school, I got to be in the plays, and I was given leads and stuff,

which was so cool. So, I was very lucky that my educators really set a very high bar for me and really gave me opportunities.

It really sparked this kind of love for me. After I left elementary school, I was like, oh, I'm just gonna get the lead in everything, obviously. And that didn't happen.

I started singing more, and that kinda became my primary thing. I just always felt this draw to the theater and the people that were there. And the collaboration that goes along with theater, that always drew me in. We did *Fiddler on the Roof*. I was cast as Yenta, which was the greatest thing that's ever happened. Because one, she is like in and out. She has the best part, and you don't have to deal with all the dying. And she's also the funniest character. So, it's really where I got to learn that comedy was my calling. And so, I left college and started doing improv and sketch comedy and standup. I kind of surrounded myself with these people accepted me as myself and didn't really care that I had a disability. They just liked that I was funny. So, that's kinda where I am now.

[bouncy electronic ambient music]

The differences between performing on TV and onstage

ALICE: Both of you have been on television and onstage. I'd like to hear a little bit more about the differences. And can you both speak to kind of what drew you to the theater in terms of this kind of medium versus other forms that you've been involved in?

SHANNON: I love doing television. One, it's less physically-demanding for me.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

SHANNON: As a comedian, it's very hard to gauge whether you were funny on a TV set. You have no idea until like six months later when the thing comes out, and you find out if people laughed. Whereas theater, you get that immediate reaction. In theater, you spend like months with these people, and you kind of get to experience this thing that happens only once, and no one will ever see that specific performance again.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

RYAN: I think there are a couple major differences. First of all, I did the public education system; I don't know about everybody.

SHANNON: Same.

RYAN: The drama club doesn't have a film and TV wing, right?

SHANNON: [laughs]

RYAN: So, at the non-professional level, the theater's the only thing that you have access to, actually.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

RYAN: And I started to realize ooh, I like being a little bit being behind the camera, and I like video editing. So, I would turn our family home movies into these edited products that were completely polished and bizarre. Like, let's watch my brother Bobby move into college and turn

it into sort of a *Trading Spaces* type of thing, before and after, absurd. It was an opportunity I had to make for myself with my little digital video camera and my Windows Moviemaker on our 2002 Dell desktop downstairs, in the basement.

Also, the difference is that film and TV, as Shannon said, is brief and less physically demanding. And it also pays more. And no one wants to hear that that's the reason that we're doing the work, but honestly, a day of TV has the potential to pay your rent for a month. That's how you sustain a living as an actor.

ALICE: That's what I love about *Law and Order*. It's like, so many actors from stage play these bit roles on *Law and Order*, and you always hear about how that show has been this lifeline of survival for a lot of working actors in New York City.

RYAN: Oh, my gosh. There's a stage actress who was just the light of the world. Her name is Jan Maxwell, and she recently passed away. When she died, all these tribute articles were coming out, retrospectives, or older articles were resurfacing of interviews that she had done. Jan had said, I think that across the iterations of *Law and Order*, she played like four different characters over a period of 10 years, and she was so grateful to that show for giving not only the exposure, but it's also like quite literally, this is how we are surviving financially in a capitalist society. If you become a series regular on a show, even if it only lasts one season, that level of financial security is unparalleled in our business.

Breaking into the industry

ALICE: And it's such a rarity as well, right? The competition is really, really tough. Both of you are in New York City now as working actors. But how hard was it to break into the industry?

RYAN: Absolutely. I'm gonna start because I have a piece of nostalgia for everybody.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

SHANNON: [chuckles]

RYAN: And that is I saw Shannon onstage in the summer of 2013. She was in a short-play festival—

SHANNON: You did?

RYAN: Yes, I did. You were in a short-play festival, and you did a play about orgasming, and you were eating a chip. And you did a play called *Good Beer* by Samuel D. Hunter, which was, for my money, was the best play that was showcased that evening. It was the first time I was in New York to do work. I was coming to do a little performance of my own, but I knew that there was this disability theater company called Theater Breaking Through Barriers. And I wanted to go and see 'cause I thought well, that is the ticket, is the disability theater company.

But to actually answer your question, also that same week, the reason I was in New York was to do a queer solo performance evening with a bunch of other LGBT people. I was doing this very sugary little three-minute—it actually was five minutes 'cause I break the rules all the time—piece about marriage and wanting to get married. And all this stuff was circling around the legality of marriage for gay people at that time. And for the first time in my life, at the age of 21, I was going to the gay bars. And I was experiencing discrimination as a disabled person for the first time that I would really clock as a concrete feeling and experience, and I created a show out of that. The show's called *Hi, Are You Single?*

I did that show for my senior capstone in college. I sold out a theater in New York, a one-night performance at a downtown venue here in New York called Dixon Place before I had even moved to the City out of college, doing this show. And that show, *Hi, Are You Single?* is the reason that people have said, “I'd love to have you come audition for this project," or "I wanna recommend him for this project because I saw his wonderful solo show." So, I broke into the industry pretty quickly. But it's all because of the work I've put into the world as a creator, not so much me sitting around, waiting for a director or a casting director to say, "You are good enough to be in my show."

ALICE: How about you, Shannon?

SHANNON: [chuckles] I feel constantly like I'm still trying to break into the industry. Every day, I feel like I am fighting to work.

You know, it’s very difficult to get into a room, an audition room, as a disabled actor. I use a power chair, and I have spinal muscular atrophy. So, I don't—

ALICE: Me too! Me too!

SHANNON: Yes!!!

ALICE: Yeah!

SHANNON: SMA! SMA Forever!

ALICE: SMA moments!

SHANNON: [laughs]

ALICE: Twinsies!

SHANNON: Twinsies! [laughs]

ALICE: Sorry. I had to do that. Sorry about that.

SHANNON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, that was very important. But I think that, and especially as a woman, looks are very important. I am very visibly disabled. A lot of times, that kind of is off-putting.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

SHANNON: And when I worked on *Difficult People*, they had not written the role specifically for a disabled person. I was just the one that they felt fit the part, and I was very lucky enough to get it. And so, that is a very rare exception in my career, but it's also one that has kind of catapulted things to happen. And I was very lucky to continue to be on that show because of Julie Klausner's vision, and you don't see that often. It's very hard to kind of constantly be saying, "I can play a secretary. It doesn't require me to jump over buildings or stuff like that. Although, if you want me to jump over a building, I can certainly try."

I created a web series called *Stare At Shannon* where I go do really weird things because I'm a weirdo. I just filmed it, and people watched it, I guess. And that has gotten me some work. So, creating stuff that you enjoy is going to hopefully catapult more work for you because you're showcasing what you know you can do. Whereas, other people, especially in the industry are

hesitant to put you into things because they're not exactly sure what you can or cannot do just because of lack of awareness.

[upbeat electronica]

What roles are currently out there for disabled actors and characters?

ALICE: I guess I wanna get both of your opinions about what's currently out there in terms of roles for disabled characters, but again, the practice of casting non-disabled folks to play disabled characters. How do you two feel about that?

SHANNON: No, it's frustrating that, as I said, it's already hard enough for us to get in the room. And then when you have a disabled character, if you're casting someone who's not disabled, then that's not fair. [laughs]

ALICE: And then there's always the excuses that like, "Oh, we can't find the right disabled actor." And it's like, motherfuckers, because of these practices, you're excluding all these actors that are out there.

SHANNON: Yeah. Well, have you tried? There's so many of us!

RYAN: And they also use the excuse of they need a star.

SHANNON: Oh, yeah. I hate that one.

RYAN: Well, I feel strongly that you can cast every other role with the biggest names in the world, let them play the supporting parts for once, and give the actual disabled lead to a disabled actor!

SHANNON: When you're constantly creating these roles for people who aren't disabled, and you have all these theories about what disabled people actually think, then it's damaging, it's inauthentic, it's across the board not right.

ALICE: Yeah, and I think this speaks to the power of media and the power of popular culture to really reinforce ableism along with all sorts of other -isms. Roles for people with disabilities or disabled characters and storylines are so limited. You know, that disability narratives that are very typical out there are overcoming your disability!

SHANNON: Yeah.

ALICE: Healing! Getting a miraculous *Deus Ex Machina* moment where you are suddenly free from the shackles of your disabling condition! Or of course, the one about death is preferable to a disability, which is again something very dangerous. This shit is not just about entertainment, but it's about reinforcing cultural norms and cultural values. And that impacts all of us because we don't really have the same power yet behind or in front of the camera.

How to improve entertainment industry representation

ALICE: What do you think are ideas of how things can be improved in the future in terms of the entertainment industry? What can they do better to really bring about authentic representation?

SHANNON: It starts with the way that characters are written. I know that Ryan is an incredible writer, and so he is actively working to fight against that. Finding characters that are written just as normal humans, you know? That's a huge thing in creating content with characters who are

just part of society. I know that if I was a kid, and I was watching stuff, and I saw someone just being part of the world, I think that I would have a much better self-esteem. And then getting authentic casting is a huge one. And just creating content that has meaning and isn't just about their disability.

RYAN: I'm trying to advance the cause, but right now, the disabled characters that I write are usually all named Ryan and based on, entirely off of myself! But part of that reason for doing that is to show that there's so many facets to my life and experience. *Hi, Are You Single?* is about me being a horny, single gay man trying to find sex and intimacy. The reason I think that dating is hard for disabled people is because there isn't representation of that. There are folks in this world who don't have anybody around them who is disabled.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

RYAN: Oftentimes, those people's only entryway is popular culture, is the media. So, we need to be advancing those stories. It starts with writers who are disabled, writing disabled characters, and it starts with writers who are non-disabled. I mean, we always need allies. In any area, every area, any minority needs an ally. And you know, I'm doing a reading of a play next week by a playwright who, to my knowledge, is not disabled, but he's written this fabulous, fabulous gay disabled lead character! Without knowing that I existed. And I wouldn't be doing the reading unless a friend of his said, "Oh, my god. You've written a part for my friend without knowing him." But if you are doing it, and you're non-disabled, you have to also be giving those characters agency. You have to be giving them depth, and you have to be making them complex and fraught and interesting and funny and sexy and all those things.

And then it turns to directing and casting directing and producing. Because, as Shannon said so beautifully how exciting it is to be cast in a role that is not written to be disabled at all.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

RYAN: And you're just cast because you're right for the part, and they make space for you and your mobility device or whatever your disability brings with it. That's a wonderful thing, but it is very rare. And hopefully, we're getting to a point where that is expanded.

SHANNON: You can't fault people in the industry for not knowing, but there also, there has to be some sort of education. I just think that that's something that just needs to be in the vernacular all the time.

ALICE: That’s why I do what I do because I think in a lot of ways, it's all about visibility and being as out and loud and proud and in your face as possible and just being our full selves as much as we can. And hopefully, when people see that, they'll get it because how else will people know you exist unless you claim yourself, you know?

RYAN: Not that I've ever played a doctor or lawyer on television. But if I did, or if Shannon did, anyone really, truly, if we play a doctor on TV or a lawyer or any kind of esteemed profession that people think like, "That's what you should aim for in your career," not only are we showing children who are watching at home, that we, as actors on this television show, are disabled and are actors and that they could be an actor, but maybe there's a child who doesn’t have any interest in entertainment or the arts, but they see us as a doctor or as a lawyer or whatever the sort of their dream is. Even if it's far away from what our dream was, they can see us, and they realize "Oh, I could be a lawyer, or I could be a doctor, or I could be a scientist, or I could be whatever it is," just because we are playing that role. If we get it right, when that happens, it will

mean so much more than ourselves and our careers because of the people that we have the opportunity to reach in those roles.

ALICE: This is a collective effort, and we're gonna get there. We're still pretty behind, but it's getting better thanks to people like you two.

[bouncy electronic ambient music]

Current or upcoming projects

ALICE: Are there any current or upcoming projects, speaking of visibility, that you have coming up that you'd like to share that you're really excited about?

SHANNON: I'm doing a show at the Public Theater called Teenage Dick. It's not a porn. I always like to clarify that. It is based on Richard III. It's a wonderful, new comedy/drama, dramedy, I guess, by Mike Lew. I'm incredibly proud of it and really, really excited to be a part of it. The Public Theater's in New York City. So, I guess if you're not in New York or the New York surrounding areas, please fly in and see it because it is that good. [chuckles] It opens June 16th and closes July 15th.

ALICE: How about you, Ryan?

RYAN: Well, I have a new solo show coming up in New York City. It's coming up very soon on Saturday, June 23rd at 7:00 pm. It's part of the ANT Fest or All New Talent Festival at Ars Nova. And the show is called *My Straighties*, and it is about my relationship as a quirky, horny, flirtatious gay boy in the midst of the men in my life who are straight or at least you know, identify as straight until proven otherwise. And it's a fun comedy meditation on masculinity and intimacy, friendship, brotherhood, and ultimately, desire I'll say.

I have a cabaret in development hopefully coming to New York in the Fall or Spring called *Falling For Make Believe*, which is about the family theater troupe that I artistic directed from the ages of 5 to 13, in which I will tell the story, predominantly tell the story but also intersperse show tunes. Just know that if you come to my cabaret, you will not be hearing Patti LuPone.

ALICE: Mm.

RYAN: So, I'm an actor who sings, not a singer who acts.

I've just returned from doing a workshop at Berkeley Repertory Theater of a new play called *Good Time Charlie*, which is my first multi-character play that I've written since becoming a professional actor and writer. *Good Time Charlie* is about my fabulous gay uncle who wanted to be in show business but ended up being a dentist instead. He's very proud of me for being in this industry but also a little envious because of what the family told him that he could not and then promptly, 25 years later said, "Oh, my god! You wanna go to New York and be an actor?! Why not!" You know, that kind of thing. So, it's really exciting.

The last thing is that I'm still touring my solo show *Hi, Are You Single?* So, upcoming tour dates in the Fall at Stanford University in California and at Davidson College in North Carolina. So, look for those as well. You can go to RyanJHaddad.com. And as soon as the contracts are signed, information will be up on my website. And we're aiming, hopefully, praying, dreaming that *Hi, Are You Single?* will get an off-Broadway run. Right now, I'm just sort of buried in a hole, praying a lot that this will be my big break.

ALICE: Well, I'm rooting for you both to have multiple big breaks because it's a hard life out there, and you both are so talented and deserve everything that's coming to you.

SHANNON: Thank you so much for doing this and for letting us talk for much longer than you probably wanted to edit. [laughs]

RYAN: Thank you!

ALICE: We have such a long way to go. It's a collective effort. We're still pretty behind, but it's getting better thanks to people like you two.

Wrap-up

[hip hop]

This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes including text transcripts are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find links about Ryan and Shannon our website.

The audio producer for this episode is Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Well, thanks for listening, and see ya on the Internets! Byeeee!